

MINDFULNESS

by Al Parikh

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness has many synonyms, some of which are awareness, attention, focus, presence, or vigilance.

You can think of mindfulness as simply being fully in the moment. One of the best definitions of mindfulness comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the now world-famous Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program. He said that mindfulness is “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.” This definition may not sound very energizing, but the beauty of the practice is in the actual experience of it.

Mindfulness is a cornerstone practice within Buddhism. While mindfulness can be practiced quite well without Buddhism, Buddhism cannot be practiced without mindfulness. Thanks to the pioneering work of Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, this practice has been repackaged in a secular format and made available to people unencumbered of any Buddhist connotations.

Multi-faced benefits of mindfulness practice

A multitude of studies have now linked mindfulness meditation with physical and mental health benefits. Richard J. Davidson, a pioneer neuroscientist, has been on the forefront of this research. Here are some of the notable benefits that accrue from mindfulness practice:

i) Changing the brain’s structure and functioning power

Years of meditative practice can dramatically increase neuroplasticity — the brain’s ability to use new experiences or environments to create structural changes. Davidson’s research on Tibetan Buddhist monks at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is contrary to the now discredited view that the brain is a physiologically static organ that deteriorates as we grow older.

ii) Dealing better with physical pain

There is a famous adage that “Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.” Pain can be defined as the physical sensation of the body responding to negative stimuli. Suffering, on the other hand, can be defined as our response to pain. Mindfulness practice first allows us to differentiate pain from suffering. It then allows us to experience how our mental reactions prolong the experience of pain. Finally, the practice provides us with tools to avoid being caught up in these reactions. This leads to lessening of suffering and can even lead to the cessation of the pain itself, as described in great detail in a book entitled “You Are Not Your Pain” by Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman.

iii) Expanding capacity for happiness

In her book titled “The How of Happiness,” psychology researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky describes happiness as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.”

Mindfulness can improve quality of life and increase happiness because of our focus on the present moment. Savoring and sustaining the experience of the present moment prevents us from dredging up past memories or dreading a future filled with hypothetical, anxiety-provoking scenarios. This kind of experience produces happiness that is not dependent on external circumstances.

iv) Achieving a state of oneness, if only briefly

A state of oneness can be described as a state of harmony between ourselves and the world around us that comes about when our psychological wall of self/other is broken down. Mindfulness practice allows us to experience in real time the conditioning effects of this wall. When we begin to pay attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment, we quickly realize how difficult such a practice can be. Almost immediately, our inner conditioning arises and keeps us distracted. By gently observing this inner drama, we stay detached and avoid being carried away in its never-ending stream. These conditioning effects keep us mired within ourselves and give us the illusion of leading a life separate from others. When these conditioning effects pass away, we gradually get the experience of a shared living experience with other beings leading to a state of oneness.

In many ways, a state of oneness can be described as “Happiness, version 2.0.”

As yet another old and famous adage states “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” When you add these benefits together, they automatically reduce stress and restore well-being. They enable us to lead better lives and make us more productive at work.